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AUTHOR Clark, Carole E.
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ABSTRACT

Effects on students of changing from the term to the semester academic calendar at Central Missouri State University (CMSU) were studied. Attention was directed to changes in average student credit hours generated, course load, grades earned, and classes dropped per students. Undergraduate and graduate students were evaluated 2 years before and 2 years after the calendar change. Term systems are based on three 10-12 week terms per year, while semester systems are based on two 15-18 week semesters. Under the term system, undergraduate students at CMSU were classified as full-time if they carried at least eight credits per term; graduate students needed six credits per term. Under semester system, undergraduates must take 12 credits per semester to be classified as full-time; graduates students need nine credits. Reductions were found in the student credit hours generated, average credit hour loads, and the proportion of full-time to part-time students. The undergraduate divisions saw decreases in the proportion of "A" to "C" grades awarded, with a corresponding increase in the proportion of "D" and "F" grades and withdrawals. There was an overall negative impact on student progress observed the first year after the calendar change; however, in most instances, improvements were seen the second year under the semester system. (SW)

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COMPARISON OF THE STUDENT CREDIT HOURS GENERATED, AVERAGE COURSE LOADS, GRADES EARNED, AND WITHDRAWALS FROM COURSES ACCOMPANYING THE CHANGE FROM THE TERM TO THE SEMESTER ACADEMIC CALENDAR AT CENTRAL MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY

by

Carole E. Clark

Research Programmer

Office of Institutional Research

Central Missouri State University

Warrensburg, Missouri 64093

(816) 429-4919

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 1984-85 academic year, Central Missouri State University (CMSU) switched from a term to a semester academic calendar. Changes were hypothesized in the average student credit hours generated, course load, grades earned, and classes dropped per CMSU student. Each of these elements was analyzed for lower division (freshmen and sophomores), upper division (juniors and seniors), and graduate students over a four-year period -- two years before and two years after the calendar change.

Reductions were found in the student credit hours generated, average credit hour loads, and the proportion of full-time to part-time students. The undergraduate divisions saw decreases in the proportion of "A-C" grades awarded, with a corresponding increase in the proportion of "D"s, "F"s, and "W"s (withdrawals). There was an overall negative impact on student progress observed the first year after the calendar change; however, in most instances, improvements were seen the second year under the semester system.

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 1984-85 academic year, Central Missouri State University (CMSU) switched from a term to a semester academic calendar. Term systems are based upon three 10-12 week terms per year, while semester systems are based upon two 15-18 week semesters; both may include an eight week summer session. Students are awarded semester credits under both the term and the semester calendar with each unit of credit being equivalent to approximately 750 minutes of classroom instruction. For example, under the semester calendar, students may earn five semester credits for a class which meets five fifty-minute periods per week and three semester credits for a class meeting three fifty-minute periods per week. Under the term calendar, they are awarded only three and two semester credits respectively for classes meeting with the same frequency but for only two-thirds the number of weeks.

Under the term system, undergraduate students at CMSU were classified as full-time if they carried at least eight credits per term (24 credits per year); graduate students needed six credits per term (18 credits per year). Under the semester system, undergraduate students at CMSU must

take 12 credits per semester (24 credits per year) to be classified as full-time students; graduate students need nine credits per semester (18 credits per year).

Under the direction of the Board of Regents, CMSU converted from the term to the semester academic calendar at the beginning of the 1984-85 academic year. A number of explanations have been advanced for this action: most colleges and universities use the semester system, the shorter terms moved too quickly to allow adequate reflection time between classes for students and faculty, the term system included an awkward winter term which was divided by Christmas vacation, and administrative costs (i.e. resources, time and money) could be cut by reducing class scheduling, enrollments, reporting, and grade distributions, from three to two times per academic year.

Since the calendar change, no formal institutional study has been conducted to assess the impact on student progress in terms of student credit hours generated, course loads, grades earned, withdrawals from classes and full or part-time status; however, a study was conducted at the end of the second year under the semester academic calendar to evaluate the calendar itself and modify it as deemed necessary.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to assess some of the impact upon students of changing from the term to the

semester academic calendar at CMSU. Each of the following elements was analyzed over a four-year period -- two years before and two years after the calendar change -- for lower division (freshmen and sophomores), upper division (juniors and seniors), and graduate students: average course load, grade distributions, rates of withdrawal from courses, and students' full and part-time status.

Hypotheses

Based upon findings of Coleman et al (1984) in their study of ten universities in Florida and Iowa undergoing similar calendar conversions, reductions were hypothesized at CMSU for the student credit hours generated, the average credit hour load, the proportion of passing grades (A-C), the course completion rate, and the proportion of full-time to part-time students.

Background

Although academic calendar changes are not uncommon, few studies have been made of their effects on the students. Most previous research has dealt with the impact on administrative costs. Coleman et al (1984) studied the enrollment and grading patterns accompanying the change from quarter to semester academic calendars at ten universities in Florida and Iowa. The quarter system is similar to the term system except that students are awarded quarter credits

instead of semester credits. They examined the last year under the quarter calendar and the first two years under the semester calendars.

A decrease in the average credit loads for upper division and graduate students (1.1 and .65 credits respectively) was observed following the calendar change. A decrease in the proportion of "A-C" grades during the first year under the new academic calendar and a significant increase in the proportion of "W"s (withdrawals) from courses were found. The changes in the proportion of "W"s and "A-C" grades earned might imply that student progress towards a degree was impeded by the calendar change. These results suggest that schools should consider the effects on enrollment and grading patterns when contemplating calendar changes and that shorter terms may have substantial advantages for students over longer semesters.

Methodology

Enrollment information, credit hours generated and grade distributions were gathered for all students attending CMSU from the 1982-83 through the 1985-86 academic years -- two years before and two years after the calendar change. Although Coleman et al (1984) used figures from only one year prior to the calendar change, two years on either side of the change were used in this study to show more clearly

the patterns in enrollment, grade distributions, and credit hours generated. The data were grouped into three levels by class rank: lower division (freshman and sophomores), upper division (juniors and seniors, including post baccalaureate), and graduate students.

Grade distributions were calculated for fall, winter, and spring terms of the 1982-83 and 1983-84 academic years and for fall and spring semesters during the 1984-85 and 1985-86 years. Summer sessions were not included. Enrollment information and student credit hours generated were collected for fall terms and semesters only. The average credit hour loads were calculated by dividing the fall credit hours generated by the respective fall headcounts. The credit hours generated and the average credit hour loads for the fall terms were equated to those of the fall semesters by multiplying the term loads by a factor of 1.5. These data are summarized in tables I, II, and III.

Results

Fall Credit Hours And Average Credit Hour Loads By Student Level

While the university showed a general decrease in enrollment during the four-year period included in this study, it was most significant for lower division students.

The number of graduate students actually increased during this period. The headcount, credit hours generated and average credit hour loads for fall terms and semesters are summarized in Table I: Fall Credit Hours And Average Credit Hour Loads By Student Level. Headcounts decreased dramatically for lower division undergraduate students, slightly for upper division students, and graduate enrollment increased slightly (-418,-47, and +13 resspectively) from the last year under the term system to the first year under semesters.

Adjusted student credit hours generated also decreased for undergraduate students and increased for graduate students during the calendar change. Lower division student credit hours generated, for example, dropped 1619 hours from the fall 1982 term to the fall 1983 term and 345 hours between the fall 1984 semester and the fall 1985 semester, but dropped a total of 6671 credit hours between the 1983 fall term and the 1984 fall semester. After an increase of 464 hours between terms, the upper division also saw a decrease of nearly 3000 hours between the last term and the first semester, followed by another decrease of nearly 1000 hours between the two semesters.

Adjusted average credit hour loads decreased steadily for all three levels of students. The upper and lower divisions' credit hour loads dropped .32 and .58 credit hours respectively between the fall 1983 term and the fall

1984 semester, while the graduate divisions' credit hour load dropped 1.72 credit hours following the change.

Proportions of Students' Full/Part-time Status Based Upon Fall Term/Semester Credit Hours Completed

Full-time and part-time enrollments for the fall terms (semesters) are summarized in Table II: Proportions of Students' Full/Part-time Status Based Upon Fall Term/Semester Credit Hours Completed. The proportion of full-time enrollments decreased for both the upper division and graduate student levels between the fall 1983 term and the fall 1984 semester (3.02% and 11.78% respectively), while the proportion of full and part-time lower division students remained fairly stable over the four-year period. There was a small but steady decrease in the overall proportion of full-time students over the entire four-year period.

Part of the change in proportions of full-time and part-time enrollment may be explained by the change in definition of full and part-time students. For example, under the term calendar, graduate students could take two night classes for three hours of credit each and be considered full-time students. Under semesters, they must take three such courses to be considered full-time. Many fully employed graduate students could manage two night courses per term, but cannot manage three such courses per semester. The overall increase in graduate students was

made up of a decrease in full-time students and an increase in part-time students, which indicates that many graduate students under both systems were taking night courses.

Proportions Of Grades Earned And Withdrawals From Courses By Student Level

Grade distributions for all students enrolled at CMSU during the 1982-83 through 1985-86 academic years, excluding summer terms, are summarized in Table III: Proportions Of Grades Earned And Withdrawals From Courses By Student Level. All three divisions saw decreases in the proportion of "A-C" grades, with corresponding increases in "D"s, "F"s, and "W"s between the 1983-84 and 1984-85 academic years.

The proportion of students earning "A-C" grades decreased and the proportion of "D", "F", and "W" grades increased significantly for lower and upper division undergraduate students (6.18% and 2.51% respectively) during the calendar change. There was a less significant shift in grades at the graduate level, and this was reversed the second year under the semester calendar. Students have more time to withdraw from classes under the semester calendar, and because course loads were larger, dropping one class does not appear to students as such a large loss.

Conclusions

The findings of this study generally support the original hypotheses. Reductions were found in the student credit hours generated and average credit hour loads after the change from the term to the semester academic calendar at CMSU. Credit hours generated decreased the most dramatically for lower division students and slightly for upper division students. Credit hours generated actually increased for graduate students, however this followed a significant increase in the enrollment of graduates.

Average credit hour loads decreased over the four-year period for all levels of students, with the most significant decrease immediately following the calendar change. The large drop in credit hours generated for upper division and graduate students the first year under the semester calendar followed an increase in credit hours generated the last year under the term calendar. This increase may have been due to students taking more courses in order to complete their degree programs before the caledar change, and would thus exagerate the drop the following year.

Reductions were found in the proportion of full-time enrollments at the upper division and graduate student levels, while the lower division proportions remained steady. Upper division and graduate students who were used

to taking 9-12 semester hours per term may have been reluctant to increase their loads to 15-18 hours under the semester system. The Coleman et al (1984) study revealed that a drop in course loads after the calendar change was partially due to misperceptions on the part of students about the number of courses they should take under the new calendar system. There was also a large number of graduate students going to night school who were unable to take the three courses necessary to be considered full-time under the semester system.

Reductions were found in the proportions of "A-C" grades, with corresponding increases in the proportions of "D"s, "F"s, and "W"s earned the first year after the calendar change, which also corroborates Coleman's findings. This trend was reversed slightly during the second year under the semester calendar. The most significant changes were found in the lower division grade distributions.

Results of this study indicate that the academic calendar change at CMSU had a significant impact on credit hours generated, average course loads, proportions of full and part-time enrollments, grade distributions, and withdrawals from courses. There was an overall negative impact seen the first year after the calendar change; however, in most cases, improvements were observed the second year under the semester system. There needs to be more research done on the actual causes and effects of these changes and to identify future trends. Other institutions

considering similar calendar changes should expect and consider the impact on enrollment and grading patterns, student progress, and other problems which may occur.

References

Coleman, D. R., Bolkte, J.R., and Franklin, F. Academic calendar impact on enrollment patterns and instructional outcomes. Research in Higher Education, 1984, 20(2), 155-156.

Table I

Changes From The Term To The Semester Academic Calendar At CMSU:

Fall Credit Hours And Average Credit Hour Loads By Student Level

Student Level	Fall Term or Semester			
	1982 (Term)	1983 (Term)	1984 (Semester)	1985 (Semester)
Lower Division				
Headcount	4499	4403	3985	3915
Credit Hours Generated	39,173	38,093.5	50,469	50,115
Adjusted Credit Hours*	58,759.5*	57,140.3*		
Average Credit Hour Load	8.71	8.65	12.66	12.80
Adjusted Load*	13.07*	12.98*		
Upper Division				
Headcount	3886	3972	3925	3869
Credit Hours Generated	35,795	36,104	51,269.5	50,285.5
Adjusted Credit Hours*	53,692.5*	54,156*		
Average Credit Hour Load	9.21	9.09	13.06	13.00
Adjusted Load*	13.82*	13.64*		
Graduate				
Headcount	1206	1294	1307	1444
Credit Hours Generated	5604	6184	7126	7129
Adjusted Credit Hours*	8406*	9276*		
Average Credit Hour Load	4.65	4.78	5.45	4.94
Adjusted Load*	6.98*	7.17*		

*The credit hours generated and the average credit hour loads for the fall terms were equated to those of the fall semesters by multiplying the term credit hours generated and the loads by 1.5.

Table II

Changes From The Term To The Semester Academic Calendar At CMSU:

Proportions* of Students' Full/Part-time Status Based Upon

Fall Term/Semester Credit Hours Completed

Student Level	Fall Term or Semester			
	1982 (Term)	1983 (Term)	1984 (Semester)	1985 (Semester)
Lower Division				
Full-time	3593 (79.86)	3432 (77.95)	3130 (78.54)	3147 (80.38)
Part-time	906 (20.14)	971 (22.05)	855 (21.46)	768 (19.62)
Total	4499 (100.00)	4403 (100.00)	3985 (100.00)	3915 (100.00)
Upper Division				
Full-time	3225 (82.99)	3231 (81.34)	3074 (78.32)	3010 (77.80)
Part-time	661 (17.01)	741 (18.66)	851 (21.68)	859 (22.20)
Total	3886 (100.00)	3972 (100.00)	3925 (100.00)	3869 (100.00)
Graduate				
Full-time	458 (37.98)	487 (37.64)	338 (25.86)	296 (20.50)
Part-time	748 (62.02)	807 (62.36)	969 (74.14)	1148 (79.50)
Total	1206 (100.00)	1294 (100.00)	1307 (100.00)	1444 (100.00)
Grand Total				
Full-time	7276 (75.86)	7150 (73.95)	6542 (70.98)	6453 (69.93)
Part-time	2315 (24.14)	2519 (26.05)	2675 (29.02)	2775 (30.07)
Total	9591 (100.00)	9669 (100.00)	9217 (100.00)	9228 (100.00)

*Proportions reported in parentheses.

Table III

Changes From The Term To The Semester Academic Calendar At CMSU:

Proportions Of Grades Earned And Withdrawals From Courses

By Student Level

Student Level	Academic Year 1982-1983	1983-1984	1984-1985	1985-1986
Lower Division				
A	21.81	21.10	17.97	18.86
B	30.65	29.71	27.28	27.40
C	25.03	25.43	24.81	24.68
Subtotal: A,B,C	77.48	76.24	70.06	70.94
D	8.27	8.38	9.81	9.87
F	4.59	4.88	7.72	7.68
W	9.66	10.50	12.41	11.51
Subtotal: D,F,W	22.52	23.76	29.94	29.06
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
Upper Division				
A	30.40	29.49	28.44	30.29
B	34.30	34.08	32.89	32.18
C	21.56	21.80	21.53	20.98
Subtotal: A,B,C	86.26	85.37	82.86	83.45
D	5.12	5.18	6.07	5.79
F	1.99	2.14	2.78	2.88
W	6.63	7.31	8.29	7.88
Subtotal: D,F,W	13.74	14.63	17.14	16.55
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
Graduate				
A	59.17	58.22	57.62	62.63
B	28.97	29.57	28.64	26.57
C	4.70	4.74	4.86	3.70
Subtotal: A,B,C	92.84	92.53	91.12	92.90
D	0.36	0.60	0.60	0.54
F	0.52	0.73	0.62	0.85
W	6.28	6.14	7.66	5.71
Subtotal: D,F,W	7.16	7.47	8.88	7.10
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

NOTE: Summer sessions were not included.